

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 4 TEL AVIV 1528

EXDIS

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, IS
SUBJ: ISRAEL AND BEGIN TRY TO BITE THE BULLET

SUMMARY: ISRAEL TODAY FINDS ITSELF FACE-TO-FACE WITH ITS
LONG STANDING FEAR THAT NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE ARABS WOULD
INVOLVE TRADING TANGIBLE TERRITORY FOR ARAB PROMISES. IT
CONFRONTS THIS UNCOMFORTABLE PROPOSITION UNEXPECTEDLY AND
AT AN INOPPORTUNE TIME. THE ISRAELI POLITICAL SYSTEM
WAS JUST BEGINNING TO ADJUST TO THE REALITY THAT LABOR
WAS NO LONGER IN POWER AND THAT MENACHEM BEGIN WAS
PRIME MINISTER WHEN SADAT CHALLENGED ISRAEL--AND IN A
VERY PERSONAL SENSE, BEGIN--TO MAKE EXCRUCIATINGLY HARD
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DECISIONS FOR PEACE. THE IMPACT OF THE SADAT INITIATIVE
HAS ONLY EXACERBATED THE SENSE OF POLITICAL CONFUSION
UNLEASHED BY THE LIKUD VICTORY. BEGIN'S ATTEMPT TO MATCH
SADAT'S GRAND GESTURE--AT LEAST IN THE SINAI--HAS ALREADY
COST HIM THE PREVIOUSLY UNQUESTIONED SUPPORT OF SOME OF
HIS CLOSEST ASSOCIATES, WITHOUT ENDEARING HIM TO ANYONE
IN RETURN. HE HAS BECOME A VERY LONELY DECISION-MAKER,

FORCED TO RELY FOR ADVICE ON MEN WHOSE JUDGMENTS HE RESPECTS BUT WITH WHOM HE HAS NO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP. HIS INSTINCTS SEEM TO TELL HIM TO HANG ON TO WHAT REMAINING SUPPORT HE CAN STILL RELY ON. IN ADDITION, HE IS UNDOUBTEDLY CONVINCED IN HIS OWN MIND THAT HE HAS ALREADY MADE NEGOTIATING CONCESSIONS WHICH SHOULD BE SUFFICIENT TO CARRY THE DAY. AS A RESULT, HE IS APPROACHING THE NEED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN BEING A STATESMAN OR A POLITICIAN WITHOUT CLEARLY REALIZING IT. NOR IS IT LIKELY THAT THE BULK OF ISRAELIS WILL PUSH HIM FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD TO PEACE; ON THE CONTRARY, HE WILL HAVE TO LEAD THEM. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT SADAT'S PREDICAMENT, WHICH BEGIN DOES NOT COMPREHEND, WILL NOT ALLOW THE TIME NECESSARY FOR BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND HIS OWN DILEMMA, MAKE THE HARD DECISIONS, AND CONVINCE THE PEOPLE. IF NOT, WE SHOULD NOT EXPECT MERE FRIENDLY PERSUASION TO SPEED THE PROCESS ALONG. END SUMMARY.

1. DURING THE CURRENT LULL IN ACTIVE NEGOTIATIONS, AND PRIOR TO THE NEXT ROUND OF VISITORS TO WASHINGTON, IT MIGHT BE USEFUL TO STAND BACK A BIT FROM THE FRANTIC PACE OF RECENT EVENTS AND TAKE STOCK OF WHERE ISRAEL IS --AND WHERE IT MIGHT BE GOING--IN THE PEACE PROCESS.

2. PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS: MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN SINCE JANUARY 18 ABOUT THE BASIC CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
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UNDERLYING THE EGYPTIAN AND ISRAELI APPROACHES TO NEGOTIATIONS. THE FORMER IS CHARACTERIZED BY THE SWEEPING GESTURE AND ONLY AFTER A RECIPROCAL GESTURE IS IT FOLLOWED BY ATTENTION TO DETAILS, WHILE THE LATTER TENDS TOWARD HARD BARGAINING OVER EVERY NUANCE FROM THE OUTSET. THIS IS BOTH TRUE AND WORTH BEARING IN MIND AS THE NEGOTIATIONS DEVELOP.

3. THERE IS A MORE BASIC DIFFERENCE, HOWEVER, FROM THE ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE, IN THE VERY MEANING OF WHAT IS HAPPENING. IT HAS LONG BEEN SAID HERE THAT, WHEN PUSH CAME TO SHOVE, ISRAEL WOULD BE ASKED TO DELIVER VERY TANGIBLE GOODS (I.E., TERRITORY) IN RETURN FOR INTANGIBLE EXPRESSIONS OF ARAB GOOD INTENTIONS. PUSH HAS IN FACT NOW COME TO SHOVE, AND IT SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISING TO SEE ISRAEL HUNG UP ON THE "TANGIBILITY FACTOR."

4. EUPHORIC AS THE RESPONSE WAS HERE, SADAT'S VISIT DEFINITELY DID NOT REPRESENT TO ISRAELIS AN EGYPTIAN QUID CALLING FOR THE KIND OF ISRAELI QUO THAT SADAT WAS OBVIOUSLY EXPECTING. IN THEIR VIEW, IT WAS MERELY HIS (RATHER TARDY) RECOGNITION OF WHAT THEY HAD KNOWN ALL

ALONG, THAT ISRAEL IS HERE TO STAY--CLEARING THE AIR,
TO BE SURE, FOR SOME SERIOUS BARGAINING, BUT NOTHING MORE.
IN THIS SENSE, BEGIN'S RHETORICAL "WHO NEEDS HIS
RECOGNITION" REFLECTS A POPULAR CONVICTION THAT IS NOT
LIKELY TO CHANGE EXCEPT PERHAPS WHEN CONFRONTED BY THE
IMPLICATIONS OF A MISSED OPPORTUNITY. SADAT, WITH HIS
BRILLIANT STROKE, MAY HAVE CONVINCED ISRAELIS HE WAS
READY TO TALK, BUT THEY RESENT ANY IMPLICATION THAT
ONLY HE CAN NOW DETERMINE WHAT TO TALK ABOUT.

5. THE POLITICAL SCENE: IN ASSESSING THE ISRAELI PER-
FORMANCE OVER THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS AND TRYING TO DIS-
CERN THE PROBABLE FUTURE, IT IS IMPERATIVE TO BEAR IN
MIND THE MAGNITUDE OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE IN LITTLE
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MORE THAN A HALF-YEAR. FIRST, THE "PERMANENT LEADER
OF THE PERMANENT OPPOSITION" ASSUMED CONTROL OF THE

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EXDIS

GOVERNMENT, WHILE THE HEIRS OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS WERE FORCED TO TAKE A BACK SEAT TO THE SAME MAN WHO THEIR POLITICAL FOREBEARS HAD FOUGHT AGAINST THIRTY YEARS AGO. TO FURTHER CONFUSE THE SITUATION A NEW FORCE EMERGED, CALLING FOR A PLAGUE ON BOTH HOUSES BUT, IN THE END, UNABLE TO INFLUENCE EITHER (THE DMC).

6. THE EFFECT OF ALL THIS WAS TO CREATE A BRAND NEW ISRAELI POLITICAL PLAY, WITH THE ACTORS STILL TRYING TO LEARN THEIR ROLES WHEN SADAT ABRUPTLY FORCED A REWRITE OF A MAJOR PART OF THE SCRIPT. THE OLD PLAY WAS CHARACTERIZED BY SEVERAL DIFFERENT "CHORUSES," EACH SPEAKING VERY DIFFERENT LINES BUT EACH QUITE CLEARLY
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UNDERSTOOD BY THE AUDIENCE. THAT, TOO, IS BEGINNING TO BREAK DOWN UNDER THE DUAL SHOCK.

7. SOME OF THOSE WHO FOLLOWED MENACHEM BEGIN MOST CLOSELY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO KEEP UP WITH HIM ALONG THE CROWDED CORRIDORS OF POLICY-MAKING. LABOR, WHICH HAS NOT YET BEEN ABLE TO PUT ITS OWN HOUSE IN ORDER AFTER A DEFEAT FOR WHICH IT WAS UNPREPARED, HAS ACCORDINGLY BEEN UNABLE TO FUNCTION AS AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION; ITS HISTORIC ABILITY TO ACCOMMODATE VARIOUS SHADES OF OPINION UNDER ONE ROOF WAS FAR BETTER SUITED TO RIDING ON THE HORSE THAN IN THE CART. THE DMC, ARITHMETICALLY PRECLUDED FROM PLAYING THE ROLE FOR WHICH IT WAS FORMED AND WITH FOREIGN AFFAIRS HAVING PRE-EMPTED ITS CHOSEN FIELD OF DOMESTIC REFORM IN THE PUBLIC MIND, IS HAVING ENOUGH TROUBLE SIMPLY HANGING TOGETHER AS A POLITICAL ENTITY. IN SUCH CONFUSION, IT IS LITTLE WONDER THAT TWO OF THE INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE THUS FAR BEEN THE MOST EFFECTIVE PERFORMERS (FOR BETTER OR WORSE) ARE THOSE WHOSE FACTIONAL ALLEGIANCES HAVE BEEN WEAKEST--DAYAN AND SHARON.

8. WHERE DOES BEGIN FIT INTO THIS PICTURE? THE ANSWER TO THIS MUST BE FOUND BOTH IN THE IMPACT OF RECENT EVENTS ON THE ISRAELI POLITICAL STRUCTURE AND IN BEGIN'S OWN PECULIAR BACKGROUND. A VIEW HELD BY SOME IS THAT HE HAS PROVEN NOT TO BE THE DECISIVE RULER OF THE ROOST THAT HE WAS EXPECTED TO BE. IN LIGHT OF THE MAGNITUDE AND RAPIDITY OF CHANGE HERE AS DESCRIBED ABOVE, BOTH IN THE INTERNAL SITUATION AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT, THAT CONCLUSION MAY BE TOO SIMPLISTIC. AFTER ALL, BEGIN

DID RESPOND DECISIVELY TO SADAT'S EARLY NOVEMBER OVERTURE
WITHOUT THE HAND-WRINGING ONE MIGHT HAVE EXPECTED FROM
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HIS IMMEDIATE PREDECESSORS; HE DID PRODUCE A SINAI
PROPOSAL SO SWEEPING THAT LABOR MODERATES TOOK UMBRAGE;
AND HIS WEST BANK SELF-RULE PLAN, WHILE OBVIOUSLY SHORT
OF THE MARK IN ARAB TERMS, IS AT THE SAME TIME A FAR
CRY FROM THE USUAL HERUT BILL OF FARE.

9. HOW TO EXPLAIN, THEN, BEGIN'S APPARENT INABILITY TO
CONTROL SHARON OR EVEN TO IMPOSE DISCIPLINE ON HIS
HERUT FOLLOWERS, MUCH LESS OTHERS IN THE COALITION? A
PREVALENT THEORY IS THAT BEGIN IS TORN BETWEEN THE PAST
MEMORY OF HIS MENTOR JABOTINSKY AND THE FUTURE VISION
OF THE HISTORY BOOKS. THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT HE IS,
AND THIS INTERNAL DIVISION IS PERHAPS BEST
SYMBOLIZED BY HIS TREATMENT OF THE SOVEREIGNTY ISSUE
IN HIS WEST BANK PLAN--NEITHER FISH NOR FOWL.

10. THERE IS, HOWEVER, ANOTHER EXPLANATION WORTH EX-
PLORING, RELATED TO THE RAPID-FIRE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS
SINCE MAY 17 AND BEGIN'S NEED TO RESPOND TO THEIR
IMPACT. FROM THE OUTSET, HE REACHED OUTSIDE HIS CIRCLE
OF INTIMATES TO FILL THE TOP THREE CABINET POSITIONS
(DAYAN, WEIZMAN, EHRLICH) AND LEFT SYMBOLS OF THE
PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATION IN VISIBLE POSTS ABORAD (DINITZ
AND HERZOG). SINCE THEN, HE HAS FOUND ONE OF HIS
CLOSEST CONFIDANTES UNABLE TO MEASURE UP TO THE TASK
REQUIRED (KATZ) AND ANOTHER IN OUTRIGHT OPPOSITION TO
HIM (COHEN). THUS, AT A CRUCIAL POINT IN THE HISTORY
OF THE STATE, HE FINDS HIMSELF SUDDENLY SEPARATED FROM
THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN HIM POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
SUPPORT OVER THE YEARS, WITHOUT--AND FOR GOOD REASON--
HAVING MUCH CONFIDENCE THAT RELIABLE POLITICAL SUPPORT IS
AVAILABLE FROM OTHER QUARTERS. FOR BEGIN TO HAVE TO RELY
ON LABOR PARTY VOTES TO BACK HIS PEACE PROPOSALS, WHILE
A SIZEABLE SLICE OF HIS OWN HERUT PARTY REBELS, WOULD
PUT HIM UNDER ALMOST INTOLERABLE EMOTIONAL STRAIN. YET
THAT MAY BE THE PRICE HE MUST PAY TO BE TRULY A NATIONAL
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LEADER.

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EXDIS

10. HE STRIKES US AS, ABOVE ALL, A VERY LONELY MAN POLITICALLY AT THIS MOMENT. THERE IS NO CABINET MEMBER TO WHOM HE FEELS CLOSE, INCLUDING THOSE ON WHOSE ADVICE HE MUST RELY IN THE CURRENT NEGOTIATIONS. THE OLD COMRADES, WITH WHOM HE STILL ENJOYS PUTTING HIS FEET UP AND RELAXING, ARE WOEFULLY SHORT ON MEANINGFUL ANSWERS TO THE COMPLEX QUESTIONS NOW CONFRONTING HIM. THERE IS, IN SHORT, NOBODY (SAVE, PERHAPS, CHAIM LANDAU) IN WHOM HE CAN TRULY CONFIDE IN EXPLORING THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS, BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC, OF VARIOUS POSITIONS. THE RESULTING LONELINESS ONLY MAGNIFIES HIS INHERENT SUSPICION OF ALL THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SHARED THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE AS HE VIEWS IT.

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12. IN THIS SITUATION, HE IS NOT ABOUT TO JEOPARDIZE

WHAT REMAINING POLITICAL SUPPORT HE CAN STILL RELY ON WHILE WALKING THE TIGHT-ROPE OF ARAB-ISRAELI (AND, AS HE SEES IT, U.S.-ISRAELI) NEGOTIATIONS. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, OCCURRENCES SUCH AS THE BANQUET "TOAST" AND OTHER RECENT HARSH STATEMENTS TAKE ON A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT LIGHT.

13. THE CONFLICT WITHIN BEGIN WHICH MAY BE MORE OPERATIVE AT THE MOMENT THAN THAT BETWEEN IDEOLOGUE AND HISTORIC FIGURE IS THAT BETWEEN STATESMAN AND POLITICIAN. IT IS WORTH RECALLING THAT FOR MUCH OF THE HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY BEGIN HAD BEEN FOR A SUBSTANTIAL SEGMENT OF THE POPULATION THE BUTT OF JOKES, A CARTOON FIGURE HARDLY WORTH TAKING SERIOUSLY. HE MUST HARBOR SUSPICIONS THAT ALL THE RECENT HEARTWARMING POLLS ACTUALLY REFLECT THE POPULARITY OF RECENT EVENTS AND WHAT THEY PROMISE FOR AN END TO CONFLICT RATHER THAN OF HIMSELF AS A LEADER--AND HE IS PROBABLY RIGHT.

14. AT THE SAME TIME, AND FOR ALL THE UNIQUELY ISRAELI REASONS LAID BARE BY THE SINAI SETTLEMENTS CONTROVERSY (SEPTIL, IF BEGIN IS TO EMERGE AS A STATESMAN AND MAKE THE DECISIONS THAT MAY BE NECESSARY IN THE PERIOD AHEAD, THE PUBLIC IS NOT GOING TO PUSH HIM THERE. ON THE CONTRARY, HE WILL HAVE TO LEAD THE PUBLIC, DEPENDENT ALL THE WHILE FOR IMPASSE-BREAKING IDEAS ON DAYAN AND WEIZMAN.

15. WE BELIEVE THAT BEGIN HIMSELF HAS NOT YET COME TO GRIPS WITH THE FULL EXTENT OF HIS OWN DILEMMA. NOTHING IN HIS PERSONAL OR PROFESSIONAL PAST COULD HAVE PREPARED HIM FOR THE CHALLENGE HE NOW FACES--WHICH IS SIMPLY TO
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RISE ABOVE THE NARROW AND DISTORTED PERCEPTIONS OF THE "OUTSIDE" WORLD WHICH MOTIVATE THE VAST MAJORITY IN THIS SOCIETY. HE CERTAINLY HAS NO GREATER FEEL FOR THE BROADER REGIONAL CONTEXT IN WHICH EVENTS ARE NOW UNFOLDING THAN THE AVERAGE ISRAELI--PERHAPS LESS. ACCORDINGLY, HE LACKS ANY REAL APPRECIATION FOR THOSE INTERESTS THAT ARE CURRENTLY SHAPING EGYPTIAN, OR AMERICAN, POLICIES. AS A RESULT, HE IS IN ALL LIKELIHOOD UNCONVINCED AS YET THAT MORE WILL BE REQUIRED OF HIM IN ORDER TO KEEP SADAT ENGAGED IN THE CURRENT PROCESS OF NEOGITATION.

16. IDEOLOGY MAY YET WIN OUT AND BEGIN BE FOUND INSUFFICIENT FOR THE TASK AT HAND; BUT BEFORE WE CAN FIND OUT, HE MUST FIRST RECOGNIZE THE TRUE NATURE OF HIS PROBLEM. IF HE CAN THEN BRING HIMSELF TO CONFRONT THE DECISIONS THAT MUST BE MADE, HE MUST STILL ACQUIRE CONFIDENCE IN HIS OWN MIND THAT THE PEOPLE WILL BE WILLING

TO FOLLOW WHERE HE LEADS. SADAT'S OWN NEEDS MAY NOT ALLOW THE LUXURY OF THE TIME REQUIRED FOR THIS TO TRANSPIRE, BUT THERE SHOULD BE NO DOUBT THAT THE MAJORITY OF ISRAELIS UP TO THIS POINT WOULD PROBABLY AGREE THAT THEIR LEADERS HAVE BEEN GIVING IT THEIR BEST SHOT.

18. CONCLUSION: IF, AS SEEMS INEVITABLE, FURTHER MOVEMENT IS REQUIRED OF BEGIN AND HIS GOVERNMENT FOR THE CURRENT NEGOTIATIONS TO SUCCEED, IT WILL NOT COME EASILY --IF AT ALL--AND THERE ARE PROBABLY ONLY TWO THINGS THAT HAVE A CHANCE OF PRODUCING IT: THE PASSAGE OF TIME WITHOUT DISCERNABLE PROGRESS AND SHOCK TREATMENT.

19. THE FORMER WOULD, ABOVE ALL, FORCE BEGIN TO CONTEMPLATE THE ROLE HE ENVISAGES FOR HIMSELF AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE POSSIBILITY THAT THIS OPPORTUNITY MIGHT SLIP AWAY. IN THIS, HE WILL HAVE THE BENEFIT OF THE IDEAS OF DAYAN AND WEIZMAN, ALTHOUGH HOW PERSUASIVE THEY WILL CHOOSE TO BE WHEN IT COMES TO MATTERS OF REAL

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SECURITY CONCERN CANNOT BE PREDICTED. IF BEGIN OPTS FOR STATESMANSHIP AND HIS PLACE IN HISTORY AS THE MAN

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WHO FINALLY BROUGHT PEACE TO ISRAEL, HE MUST FIRST ACQUIRE MORE CONFIDENCE THAT MOST OF HIS PARTY, HERUT, WILL FOLLOW HIM. HE MUST ALSO GIVE THE WIDER ISRAELI PUBLIC SOME MORE TIME TO CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF FAILURE, AND TO WEIGH IN THE BALANCE ITS NEED FOR PEACE AGAINST ITS DESIRE FOR A DEGREE OF GUARANTEED SECURITY THAT IS PROBABLY NOT OBTAINABLE.

20. WE CANNOT SAY HOW MUCH TIME WOULD BE NECESSARY FOR THE ABOVE PROCESSES TO HAVE THE DESIRED EFFECT OR, INDEED, WHETHER THEY WOULD. IT MAY BE THAT SUFFICIENT TIME SIMPLY IS NOT AVAILABLE, AS VIEWED FROM SADAT'S PERSPECTIVE. IF THIS IS THE CASE, FRIENDLY PERSUASION
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CANNOT BE EXPECTED TO WORK IN THE SHORT TERM AND SOME FORM OF SHOCK TREATMENT WOULD BECOME THE ONLY HOPE FOR ACHIEVING MOVEMENT IN BASIC ISRAELI POSITIONS. THIS WOULD BE EXTREMELY TRICKY AND OBVIOUSLY PAINFUL, SINCE IT WOULD HAVE TO HINT AT CHANGES IN THE BASIC NATURE OF THE U.S.-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP--AND IT STILL MIGHT NOT WORK. IT WOULD, HOWEVER, SUCCEED IN BRINGING TO A HEAD THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO STRAINS OF THOUGHT HERE, ONE NEW AND ONE VERY OLD: "PEACE IS WITHIN REACH" AND "IF NECESSARY, GO IT ALONE." WHAT THIS SYSTEM WOULD DO TODAY WITH THAT CHOICE IS, AT THIS POINT, ANYBODY'S GUESS.
LEWIS

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